

# Social Networking in Higher Education

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The many projects and services under the Web 2.0 umbrella are now a fact of the global information world. Technorati last tracked 70 million updated blogs, a number that continues to grow.<sup>1</sup> *Wikipedia*, having outpaced *Encyclopedia Britannica* in number of articles and word count, has become the most famous and at the same time most disparaged encyclopedia in centuries.

Social networking services routinely enroll millions. Social music-sharing services continue to grow, as Last.fm continues to build a user base and Apple's iTunes now maintains a social function, My iTunes (<http://www.apple.com/itunes/myitunes>). It is no longer shocking to realize that photos are largely digital, rather than analog; it is also not surprising that they are published in active social networks, such as Flickr and Picasa. RSS feeds appear not only on most blogs and news sites, but on campus home pages and corporate intranets. Folksonomic tagging, briefly controversial, now appears in the most widely used platforms, like Amazon.com and YouTube.

Such a list can go on, but students are sometimes better positioned than older campus staff members to enumerate it. Teenagers might blog at the moment, or have either a MySpace or Facebook account, then shift to another platform as it emerges. They might not maintain wikis, but *Wikipedia* is both useful to them and perhaps slightly exciting as its notoriety grows. To post to a forum, add to a friend's wall, check out an attractive person's photos, or follow a sports figure via YouTube clips is generally unremarkable. And these are teenagers; younger children did not experience Web 1.0. These kids might play with Webkinz or Neopets (<http://www.webkinz.com>, <http://www.neopets.com>), creatures with elaborate social lives in Web browsers. Perhaps they played with other children as pirates (Puzzle Pirates, <http://www.puzzlepirates.com>), or fellows in Disney theme parks (Virtual Magic Kingdom, <http://vmk.disney.go.com>), or playful flightless waterfowl (Club Penguin, <http://www.clubpenguin.com>). Not yet in middle school, future college students are already participating in online social networks, consuming digital media

there, and starting to create digital content. Web 2.0 is not remarkable; it describes simply the background structure of media and socialization.

How can colleges and universities respond to this world, which has erected itself around us in a very few years? As we nurture campus networks, support users in their engagement with the entire digital cosmos, how do we respond to this subtle transformation in the environment? And as we continue our investment in licensed content, licensed applications, locally accessible databases, and password-protected courseware, how do we experience this parallel universe of sometimes breathtaking openness and sociability? Several avenues are open to us and have already been trodden by some institutions: learning from successful architecture, following new and emerging technologies that are changing learning (what some call Learning 2.0), and rethinking literacy.

## Identifying Successful Architecture

To begin with, we can examine what works in Web 2.0. That is, without revisiting the endlessly vexed question of defining the term, we can identify the information architecture components that have enabled the movement's quantitative success. One of those pieces is microcontent. To create a blog post, one only need write a paragraph, without using (or knowing) HTML. To create a blog from scratch, the user simply fills out a form, which is about as challenging as buying a DVD from Amazon: No knowledge of graphic design, style sheets, FTP, or web-server protocol is needed. To edit a wiki requires even less time. Adding a URL to del.icio.us means a click and a few fields. This lowering of the bar for digital publishing explains the Web 2.0 content boom.

We are already familiar with microcontent publishing in higher education. What else is uploading a syllabus to one's Moodle course or forwarding a document to be turned into an e-reserve? Higher education has also experienced a gold rush in microcontent via course management systems, with enormous amounts of class materials uploaded by faculty who would certainly "web up" less if forced to use an HTML editor and FTP client. Perhaps focusing on this homegrown microcontent process, making it easier and more visible, will grow digital teaching still further.

What our course management systems and databases do not generally offer, however, which Web 2.0 does, is the social factor. The history of social software's popularity proves that people very much want to communicate with others online. We love reading other writers, listening and commenting on their podcasts, checking their daily lives via Twitter, laughing at photos on MySpace. The two-way nature of social software,

its role in the read/write web, makes this function self-reinforcing, as my comment on your blog entices a third person to comment, which grows your blog's total content still further, and so on. The openness and searchability of such content to the entire web-accessing world means content can find consumers no matter the niche, in classic long-tail fashion.

A virtual learning environment consisting solely of students and instructor, in contrast, cannot partake of these network effects. One way forward for higher education is to nudge more digital content into the open web, combining our honed wariness about privacy and security with our awareness of the full-blown social web.

## Learning from Learning 2.0

Another way forward is to learn more about those who have already leaped into the web to teach, and to follow the emerging Learning 2.0. Higher education faculty have been quietly blogging for some time, and in various formats. Professors “web up” course syllabi, blog about their research interests, advocate for their field in the public sphere (as public intellectuals), require students to blog, and hold professional seminars in distributed inter-blog conversations. While *Wikipedia* takes the lion's (or vulture's) share of educational attention, faculty and their students have been creating wikis for Latin literature and Romantic poetry, spectroscopy and Karl Marx, taking advantage of what may be the world's most collaborative writing platform. Professors podcast lectures and course notes, while some students podcast right back (Swarthmore's War News Radio, for example). And those faculty have used Web 2.0 to record, share, and reflect on their experiences, participating in, while taking advantage of, the “small pieces loosely joined” style of social media conversation. One may easily read or listen to edu-bloggers, and find articles, notes, and an increasing number of print books on Web 2.0. A large body of such knowledge based on reflected practice now exists; we can draw on it to ease the way for campus explorers after such pioneers have publicly blazed sociable trails.

Pointing to such trailheads might mean not supporting Web 2.0 technologies, but getting out of the way of users. An increasing number of colleges and universities have paid Apple for iTunes U or installed blog and wiki platforms. A large number have not, or at least not at the enterprise level, for reasons ranging from LDAP integration to open source worries. Given the extensive rise in off-campus platforms, which range in cost from free to inexpensive, at times it might be a better use of staff resources to point faculty off-site, outsourcing that support. Faculty increasingly arrive on campus with off-site dependencies, which taken together constitute what a recent CIO.com article calls “the shadow IT department.”<sup>2</sup>

Downsides can include, besides the usual outsourcing difficulties, a loss of campus branding without a negotiated host and the expending of some research time to select appropriate third parties. But as Web 2.0 continues to expand and campus IT budgets do not swell at that rate, recognizing the already existing off-campus support might be practical.

As the world becomes increasingly shaped by Web 2.0 practices, our collective experience of information is transformed. Citizens increasingly contribute content to global conversations, from pedestrians publishing mobile phone photos on the BBC site to South Korea's OhmyNews, leading to a rebirth in citizen journalism.<sup>3</sup> Our perceptions of YouTube videos, blog posts, and even books at Amazon.com's site are shaped by popular interventions, rankings, and responses.

## Rethinking Literacy and Thinking Critically

Two responses appear to be incumbent on higher education. The first involves rethinking literacy, as colleges have taught a variety of literacies for decades (speech, writing, media). If we want our students to engage the world as critical, informed people, then we need to reshape our plans as that world changes. To an extent, teaching students to use IP-restricted databases is to prepare them for rare experiences. Universities can also draw on more than a decade of work by librarians on information literacy or information fluency.<sup>4</sup> Second, to the extent campus populations already contribute to Web 2.0 projects, higher education can become more deliberate in those interventions. For example, while many students arrive on campus with some degree of technological fluency, they may lack the intellectual tools to think critically about much of their experience.

Discussions of privacy and copyright, and questions about creativity and appropriation, citizenship, and governance can become grounded in years of social media experience. Such instruction and conversation is well suited to the first-year seminar and responds well to interdisciplinarity. IT professionals, librarians, faculty, and students can contribute from their specialties, traditions, and experience. Consider the case of *Wikipedia*. It cuts across disciplines, from faculty in computer science to political science to sociology. Librarians bring to bear more than a century of information retrieval and current professional discussion. IT staff can explain IP tracking, wiki structures, and markup. How much better than simply avoiding *Wikipedia* would such an intellectual and professional engagement be!

## Summary

For each of the approaches suggested in this essay, intercampus collaboration is more necessary than ever. Web 2.0 projects develop with a speed considered fast even for the digital world, rippling across computing categories while developing new ones. (Just what is Twitter; microblogging? Then what is Pownce?) Sharing experiences and lessons learned with these many platforms is powerful and benefits from a large field of case studies. Approaches beyond the three outlined in this brief discussion should surface and be discussed in the best traditions of the open source world and of academe. Only then can we begin to prepare ... for Web 3.0.

## Endnotes

1. David Sifry, "The State of Technorati, April 2007," *Sifry's Alerts* (posted April 3, 2007), <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000492.html>.
2. Ben Worthen, "User Management: Users Who Know Too Much and the CIOs Who Fear Them," *CIO* (February 15, 2007), <http://www.cio.com/article/28821>.
3. Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2004).
4. See Association of College and Research Libraries, *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report* (Washington, DC: ACRL, 1989), <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/whitepapers/presidential.cfm>, as well as the ACRL's website, *Information Literacy*, <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlissues/acrlinfolit/informationliteracy.cfm>.

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